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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR, SENATORS PRAISE IRAQI VOTERS, ELECTION PROCESS
AT BABIL PROVINCE POLLING STATION

REF: HILLAH 0341

11. (U) Summary: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and U.S. Senators Joseph Biden, Lindsay Graham, Saxby Chambliss and Maria Cantwell praised the Iraqi people for their participation in the national election before a group of Western and Iraqi reporters outside a downtown Al-Hillah polling station December 15. "I want to congratulate the Iraqi people on a good day, a great day," Ambassador Khalilzad declared. The Ambassador assured the Iraqis that the U.S. would stay with them until the Iraqis were able to stand on their own feet. Senator Biden added that he was looking forward to the formation of an Iraqi government and the development of the Iraqi Constitution. End summary.

12. (U) Ambassador Khalilzad and the Senators were greeted by Al-Hillah Mayor Imad Lefta Al-Bayati and Babil Province Police Chief General Qais Hamza Aboud Mahmori outside the Al-Waili High School, in downtown Al-Hillah, one of 268 provincial polling centers. Ambassador Khalilzad commented on the refuse in the streets and suggested to the Mayor that USG and the local government explore ways to assist the city and improve the situation. The delegation joined sporadic groups of young Iraqi men and families, many carrying small children, walking towards the front gate of the school courtyard. Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) officials and the male and female security screeners on duty welcomed the Ambassador and his party warmly.

13. (U) After passing another security screen and entering the high school, the Ambassador and the Senators turned down a narrow hallway where four classrooms had been converted into polling stations. Ambassador Khalilzad congratulated a handful of voters in the first room as Mayor Lefta explained the voting process, a set of successive steps in which the voter checks his or her name, receives a ballot, marks the ballot and folds it behind a screen, dips a finger in indelible purple ink, and deposits the ballot in a large plastic box.

14. (U) Election observers from the Badr Organization, the Iraqi National Accord (INA), the Iraqi Election Information Network (EIN) and another local non-governmental organization were in the room, and Ambassador Khalilzad asked them if they could challenge voters. The observers replied that they could. The Ambassador and the Senators then dipped their own fingers in the ink, held them up and told the voters, IECI staff, and Western and Iraqi press crowded into the room how proud they were to witness the voting process. Iraqis continued to walk into the other voting rooms as the Ambassador and the Senators stood inside the first polling station in the hallway.

15. (U) Outside the school, the Ambassador and Senators took questions from reporters from outlets that included the Los Angeles Times, the Sunday Telegraph, Reuters, and the Iraqi news outlets Al-Mada newspaper, Al-Fayhaa newspaper, Ishtar newspaper, Al-Diyar TV, Al-Watan newspaper, and Al-Sabah newspaper. "I want to congratulate the Iraqi people on a good day, a great day," Ambassador Khalilzad told the assembled press. "I want to assure them that we will be with them until they can stand on their own feet."

16. (U) "The organization is impressive. The turnout is impressive," Senator Biden offered. "We look forward to getting the results counted, and watching the Iraqis form a government." Senators Graham and Cantwell praised the Iraqi people for their bravery, and Senator Chambliss declared, "We are very happy to be here today to get the chance to observe history being made. Iraq is very justly and rightly a proud country today, and we're happy to be here."

17. (U) Asked about Sunni turnout and the prospects for disaffected Sunnis engaging in the political process, Ambassador Khalilzad related, "my hope is that the role of bullets will decline, and the role of politics, of compromise, of political competition will increase. This is a first step, an important step. Democracy is on the march." Senator Chambliss proclaimed the day, "a great victory for the Iraqi people."

18. (U) "We saw today that the Iraqi people want to vote. They want to choose their leaders," Senator Biden observed. Then, referring to the process of choosing a government and finalizing those constitutional articles not finalized in the initial drafting process, Senator Biden added, "now the hard part of democracy comes." Senator Graham offered some advice to the Iraqi reporters present. Americans took 11 years to arrive at their Constitution, Senator Graham observed. He explained that

it took over 100 years for women to be granted the right to vote. "Learn from our mistakes," the Senator suggested.
FONTENEAU